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ABSTRACT

This practicum sought to elevate the morale level of direct-care staff in a residential group care setting providing residential care to dependent, neglected, and/or abused children ages 7 through 17. Four solution strategies were attempted that addressed the areas of staff support, communication, and recognition. A representative of a top administrative position conducted personal visits with staff at service sites. Three roundtable dialoguing meetings were held within each of three regions. Agency communication was enhanced through retargeting and increasing the frequency of an intra-agency publication so that its focus was on direct care staff. All staff were deputized to assist administration in identifying and recognizing direct-care staff who demonstrated exemplary service. A system was established for receiving and acknowledging recommendations and for inducting selected staff members into an honor society. Two of three objectives were met with the third being impacted through an unexpected turn of events unrelated to the solution strategies. Turnovers which had averaged 10 per quarter were reduced to zero during the implementation period. Supervisors of direct-care staff reported improvement in the general morale levels of their supervisees following implementation. While self-reported job satisfaction ratings among these staff reflected some improvement, the degree of improvement did not meet the objective. The results clearly demonstrated the potential of proactive intervention techniques for improving the morale level of staff.
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IMPROVING THE MORALE LEVEL OF DIRECT-CARE STAFF
IN A RESIDENTIAL GROUP SETTING THROUGH
SUPPORT, COMMUNICATION, AND RECOGNITION

by

Jimmy McAdams

Cluster 37

A Practicum I Report Presented to the
Ed.D Program in Child and Youth Studies
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of Doctor of Education

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Date of Final Approval
of Report

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ABSTRACT

Improving the Morale Level of Direct-care Staff in a Residential Group Home Setting Through Support, Communication, and Recognition. McAdams, Jimmy. 1991: Practicum I Report, Nova University, Ed.D Program in Child and Youth Studies. Descriptors: Staff Morale/Residential Programs/Group Homes/Staff Support/Communication/Recognition

This practicum sought to elevate the morale level of direct-care staff in a residential group care setting. Corollary aims were to reduce staff turnover and to improve staff performance both qualitatively and quantitatively.

Four solution strategies were attempted which addressed the areas of staff support, communication, and recognition. The writer, representative of a top administrative position, conducted personal visits with staff at service sites. Three roundtable dialoguing meetings were held within each of three regions. Agency communication was enhanced through retargeting and increasing the frequency of an intra-agency publication so that its focus was on direct care staff. All staff were deputized to assist administration in identifying and recognizing direct-care staff who demonstrated exemplary service. A system was established for receiving and acknowledging recommendations and for inducting selected ones into an honor society.

Three objectives were established for measuring the success of goal accomplishment. Two of the three objectives were met with the third being impacted through an unexpected turn of events unrelated to the solution strategies. Turnovers which had averaged 10 per quarter were reduced to zero during the implementation period. Supervisors of direct-care staff reported improvement in the general morale levels of their supervisees following implementation. While self-reported job satisfaction ratings among these staff reflected some improvement, the degree of improvement did not meet the objective. The practicum clearly demonstrated the potential of proactive intervention techniques for improving the morale level of staff.

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CHAPTER I

Introduction

Description of Work Setting and Community

The setting for this practicum was a century old sectarian, private, nonprofit agency providing a continuum of services to dependent, neglected and/or abused children and their families. Residential care is provided for approximately 550 young people annually in a network of three campuses, three group homes and four emergency shelters scattered throughout a southeastern state. Approximately one-half of the clients served in these facilities are referred by state agencies who hold their custodies with the remaining half coming from private referrals.

While the agency is licensed by the state regulatory body to serve in residential care ages 7 through 17, the average age of residential clients typically remains at 13 years. Except for those in shelter programs, where stay is limited to 60 days, the average length of stay is around 14 months.

Clients enter the program with a plan of care developed through input from the client, the client's custody holder(s), and the treatment team. Clients reside in a cottage of from five to nine other residents and two adults who provide the supplemental parenting. Major goals

in a resident's plan of care may include aspirations related to behavior, education, family relations, peer relations, vocational skill acquisition, or personal discipline.

Augmenting the aid provided through residential services, the agency offers additional programs including regional resource and counseling centers, foster care, adoption services, and family education programs. Maternity care and group homes for adults with developmental disabilities are also services of the agency.

Organized for maximum supervisory proficiency, the agency recognizes six categories of employees including administrative, program coordination, social work, support services, direct-care, and clerical. The focus of this practicum was on the direct-care staff called group leaders. These individuals lived in the cottages or group homes with from 6 to 10 young people ranging in age from 8 to 17. Generally, the group leaders were couples, though in some cases two unrelated individuals of the same sex were paired to work with a group. Within a unit cluster, group leaders were a part of a team consisting of approximately seven other group leaders, two family counselors, and a unit director. Supervision was provided through the unit director who was required to have a minimum of a master's degree.

The approximate average age of group leaders within the agency was 38 years. About one-fifth had educational

degrees beyond the post-secondary level. The group leaders were at least 21 years of age and possessed a minimum high school education. They had expressed an eagerness to become a part of a team committed to helping troubled and sometimes troublesome children.

The Writer's Work Setting and Role

The writer served in an administrative role with the child caring agency and, through three regional administrators, provided overall direction for the program while being supervised by the executive director of the agency. Responsibilities include program planning, evaluation, quality assurance, marketing, administration of the division budget, adherence to regulatory standards, and development of policies and procedures--including those relating to personnel--as well as monitoring compliance thereto.

The writer held undergraduate degrees in psychology and sociology as well as a graduate degree in pastoral training. The writer had 14 years of experience as a pastor and nine years within the residential child care field. While the nine years in child care had been with the same organization, the writer had moved through several positions to arrive at the current role of assistant executive director. This ascendancy included service as a chaplain and a campus administrator. A prior term of service as an elected trustee of a child care organization

provided the writer with an additional perspective of the field.

CHAPTER II

Study of the Problem

Problem Description

The amount of giving necessary for staff providing supplemental parenting for youth in a residential child care setting often leaves them feeling empty. Unless this void is partially replenished by a sense of worthiness, an awareness of achievement, and a feeling of being appreciated, an individual is likely to experience low morale in the role and consequently function at levels well below their performance potential. Symptoms of burnout become more prominent often climaxing in the resignation of a frustrated worker. The frustrated worker frequently leaves a frustrated supervisor wondering what could have been done to lengthen the relationship and make it more satisfactory for both parties involved. The construct being described is that of morale. It is a construct that is perceptual in nature but one that is as real as any objective property of an organization.

Within the agency under review, the level of morale among direct-care staff needed to be elevated. Low morale was expressing itself in excessive turnover, reduction in efficiency, and the waste of human resources potential. In short, low morale was thought to be hampering both the qualitative and quantitative levels of service.

Problem Documentation

Since morale level does not lend itself to traditional empirical measurements, documentation that a problem existed had to defer to symptomatic expressions of low morale, job satisfaction reports from the staff members themselves, and to perception assessments provided by those who supervise the direct-care staff.

Turnover among staff. During a recent twelve month period, 38 of 78 direct-line staff had voluntarily resigned their positions and left the agency. Several others exited their positions in order to assume other roles within the system or because of non-voluntary terminations. These figures revealed that more than half of the direct-care staff turned over during one year. While such positions generally have a high turnover rate, 50% within the year appeared excessive. It pointed to an underlying discontent among employees occupying these positions.

Supervisors' perceptions. Interviews were conducted with the supervisors of direct-care staff within the three administrative regions (see Appendix A). Prior to these interviews, several supervisors had offered unsolicited comments indicating a recognition of lagging morale among their supervisees. In the interview, each supervisor was asked to rate the present level of morale among the direct-care individuals they supervised on a scale from 0 to 10. The average rating given direct-care

staff by those that work most closely with them was 4.5. When asked if their rating was "significantly below," "slightly below," "about average," "slightly above," or "significantly above" that typically characterizing those in direct-care positions, the response offered most frequently was "slightly below."

Satisfaction survey. In order to ascertain how direct-care staff felt about their jobs, a job satisfaction survey was conducted (see Appendix B). Sixty-eight responses were collected. Since the surveys were unsigned, potential confidentiality concerns or the threat of reprisal should have been virtually eliminated. While the survey instrument sought to measure satisfaction levels of several different dimensions of the job, the real purpose was to get an indication of overall satisfaction. Hence the ratings were combined and averaged for each region. Preliminary analysis suggested a sagging morale as mirrored in job dissatisfaction.

This survey instrument was administered again at the conclusion of the implementation period spanning three months in order to measure any changes in general satisfaction levels.

Causative Analysis

Several significant factors within the work environment were identified as contributors to a low morale level among direct-care staff. Included were: low

salary, a feeling of isolation from upper level management, limited power in getting their concerns heard, lack of appropriate recognition and reward, and communications shortcomings.

Low Salary. Historically, direct-care staff in not-for-profit environments have received salaries considerably below that of their counterparts in other programs. A perusal of the salary scale utilized by the organization under review revealed that most staff are compensated less than that garnered by similarly trained personnel in comparable roles among other professions. Within a pay scale that is overall below the norm, the category of direct-care staff appears near the entry level.

Isolation. The sheer size of the program and the wide geographical distribution of its employees made frequent physical appearances by upper level management extremely difficult. A frequent complaint from direct-care staff was "They [referring to top management] have never been in my cottage." Some staff interpreted this lack of presence as a lack of awareness and a lack of concern. They were always being impacted by the decisions of these administrative persons whom they rarely saw and almost never engaged one-on-one. These voids translated into a perceived lack of support. The psychological consequence of such isolation was that direct-care staff began to feel that they were of infinitesimal significance

to the team effort.

Limited power for being heard. The agency placed a premium on respecting lines of authority. Major issues and concerns were addressed through the sometimes cumbersome process of "going through the channels" which meant introducing concerns at your level of the hierarchy and hoping that the information trickled on up to the position which held the authority to get something done. This limited power to go straight to the top with major concerns, had an obvious demoralizing affect.

Achievements unrecognized or unrewarded. The scrutiny of regulation reviews along with the increasing litigious nature of society had seemingly produced a mind-set within residential programs that focused on identifying the errors that potentially placed the agency in jeopardy. The agency reviewed was no exception. At best, meritorious achievements were treated as what was expected; at worst, they were ignored. No program existed that systematically assured that positive accomplishments in the work role of direct-care staff would be regularly and appropriately recognized and rewarded by the agency.

Communications shortcomings. The sagging morale level among direct-care staff was partially attributable to the shortcomings of internal communications. These front-line staff sometime felt that they were last to receive valuable information concerning what was occurring within the organization. The logical conclusion

subsequently drawn was that if they were last to know, they must be last in importance.

Relationship of the Problem to Literature

The literature review of morale revealed this to be a subject of no small interest to researchers. Such morale interests traversed a number of disciplines indicating its application within a wide spectrum of organizations. The literature was most helpful in identifying conditions that generally produce high and low morale and in explaining the potential impact of morale levels upon an organization's pursuit of its goals.

A Managerial Crucible. Researchers were in agreement that morale is a hypothetical construct of major managerial importance. Manning and Kent (1988) graphically depicted the crucial role of this phenomenon by declaring, "If meaning is the helmsman of work, morale is the wind that fills the sail. Morale energizes people, bringing out the best in their job performance" (p. 17).

But how could such a construct be quantitatively measured so that management could assess the level of morale as it existed among their employees? The literature provided sample indexes, surveys, and other methodologies for accomplishing this assessment (Benze & Hickey, 1984; McKown, 1958; Thompson, 1984).

Napoleon is credited with the statement, "An army's success depends on its size, equipment, experience, and

morale...and morale is worth more than all of the other elements combined" (as cited in Manning & Kent, 1988, p. 5). Such understanding provoked some of the earliest formal efforts to measure and manipulate morale levels among military troops.

Recent research underscores the value of morale among professional educators. Staff development coordinators within the Georgia educational system rated "staff morale" as the most pressing need among 61 possible choices (Katz, 1988). Such a condition would account for what Gilman (1988) calls "professional mortality," a situation that finds 50% of the nation's teachers leaving the profession within five years.

Following up on a perceived interest in morale within the business market, pollster Louis Harris surveyed 1,500 office workers and bosses and observed that an aspiration gap existed between what workers wanted and what they were getting in their jobs (Modic, 1989). A growing number of studies relating specifically to daycare and residential child care personnel seemed to be focussing on the critical role staff morale occupies in the wide arena of managerial concerns (Krueger, 1986; Nelson, 1990).

Impact of a Sagging Morale. A wealth of literature provided insights into the potential impact of low morale on an organization. Such information assisted not only in identifying specific signs or evidences of a sagging morale, it also delivered some insights into the potential

costs of this condition to an organization, thus supplying an attractive incentive for corrective actions.

Researchers have rather consistently linked low morale with a series of negative conditions including increased absenteeism, high turnover, numerous grievances, careless work habits, reduced performance, and lack of respect for rules and policies (Thompson, 1984; Whitney & Cooper, 1989). Of particular interest to this practicum were the studies which demonstrated a strong relationship between morale and staff turnover (Benze & Hickey, 1984; Krueger, 1986; Nelson, 1990). Krueger focused specifically on staff in residential group care settings and concluded that growing empirical evidence pointed to the conclusion that high levels of satisfaction were associated with lower levels of turnover.

In summary, the literature was replete with convincing evidence linking morale to job performance and job tenure. Abundant literary evidence was also present demonstrating that morale is a construct that can be influenced and even changed by manipulating the conditions within a work environment.

CHAPTER III

Anticipated Outcomes and Evaluation Instruments

Goals and Expectations

The major projected goal for this practicum was to raise the morale level among direct-care staff. The expectation was that morale would be elevated above that which was symptomatically evident prior to planned interventions.

Behavioral Objectives

Three specific objectives were identified which would assist in the accomplishment of the major goal as stated above.

Objective 1. The number of direct-care staff turning over during the quarter would be at least two less than the average quarterly turnover during the previous year.

Objective 2. All three regional areas would report improvement in direct-care morale levels as perceived by supervisors on pre and post interviews.

Objective 3. Self-reported job satisfaction average rating would improve during the implementation phase by at least one point over the average survey rating at the pretest stage.

Measurement of Objectives

Measurement of objective 1 was accomplished through compiling and analyzing agency personnel records. Computerized records readily produced a listing of individuals occupying direct-care positions along with beginning and terminating dates. The 12 months immediately preceding implementation revealed 38 voluntary terminations for a quarterly turnover average of 9.5 rounded to 10. At the conclusion of implementation, a similar report covering the quarter of implementation was secured. The number of turnovers in this period was then contrasted with the quarterly average prior to intervention.

Measurement of objective 2 occurred through comparisons of responses of supervisors of direct-care staff on pre and post interviews. In both interviews, the supervisors were contacted by this writer. The supervisors were informed that a study was being conducted on morale levels among direct-care staff. Three questions were then posed: (1) "On a scale of 1 to 10, where would you rate the current morale level of your supervisees?" (2) "Would you consider the rating you have given to be 'significantly below,' 'slightly below,' 'about average,' 'slightly above,' or 'significantly above' the level typically expected of direct-care staff?" (3) "How many direct-care staff do you supervise?" Responses were charted on both pre and post interviews. This instrument

intended to measure changes in morale as perceived by the staff who relate daily to those in direct-care roles.

Objective 3 was measured by contrasting pre and post job satisfaction surveys administered to direct-care staff (see Appendix B). The instrument, developed for this practicum, contained four sections, all limited to one page. The first section requested their years of experience in residential service. Such information would be essential should an inquiry of correlation between job satisfaction and tenure be desirable. The second section requested ratings on a six point scale of their satisfaction levels regarding thirteen key job issues. The third section took the general approach and gleaned how they rated their overall job satisfaction among the following possibilities: "low," "below average," "average," "positive," and "strongly positive." The final section was open-ended and asked for any comments the individual wished to offer.

The job satisfaction survey was administered by this writer in a group meeting of direct-care staff in each of the three regions. Those surveyed were informed that the survey represented one part of an agency-wide project to assess current morale levels among direct-care staff, that their responses should be candid and honest, that names were not to be attached to the survey, that individual responses would be entirely confidential, and that tabulation would be done by a disinterested party who

would report results to the surveyor. Ample time was allowed for completion of the form.

CHAPTER IV

Solution Strategy

Discussion and Evaluation of Possible Solutions

The available literature provided valuable assistance in identifying and delineating significant factors which cause levels to ebb and flow on the morale continuum. These factors are essentially the causal influences or conditions that determine the morale level within an organization. Once the causes of low morale were identified, possible solution strategies began to emerge.

Intrinsic structures. A convenient place to begin a perusal of these possible solution strategies was within the policy and procedure structure of the organization. Krueger (1985) suggests one of the most morale-building elements an organization can provide is a level/step plan. Such a mechanism enables the employee to develop and move up within his job or profession. He does not feel caught in a system that stifles growth and professional advancement.

A sense of purpose. Other contributing factors are not so tangible as a level/step plan. For instance, a sense of purpose in work impacts how an employee relates and feels as well as the degree to which he is committed to his task; it is not sufficient to simply be "making a living." Abraham Maslow writes: "The only happy people I

know are the ones who are working well at something they consider important" (as cited in Little, 1990, p. 24). The compensating power of purpose can be seen in executives' willingness to put in 67 to 112 hour work weeks and not complain about being overworked (Whyte, 1956).

Decision involvement. Decision involvement (having some say in the movement of an organization toward its goals) or, participative management, as it is sometimes called, is a major determinant of staff morale according to the literature (Eger, 1989; Manning & Kent, 1988; Neihoff, Enz, & Grover, 1990; Rarick, 1987). Manning and Kent contend that, "The excellent companies treat the rank and file as the root source of quality and productivity gain. They do not foster a we/they labor attitude..." (p. 101). Advocating maximum utilization of staff potential through employee participation, Benze and Hickey (1984) suggest that quality circles, a concept originated in Japan and introduced in America around 1974, serves as an apt illustration of how participatory management is employed in a work setting.

Developing a "we" attitude within a work environment allows for what Harrison (1987) calls a "support culture" in which mutual trust evolves between management and workers. In such an environment, personal needs of employees are not ignored in the daily push to meet quotas or fulfill expectations. Hence the demoralizing impact of

employees feeling "used" is circumvented. Research conducted by Krueger (1986) among residential group care staff revealed the number two predictor of job satisfaction to be decision involvement.

Free-flowing communications. Another solution to low morale alluded to in literature related to communications. Evidence indicates that effective, timely, and free-flowing communication facilitates the maintenance of high morale among staff. Manning and Kent (1988) found that in top organizations, goals, working conditions, and work related issues were often discussed in regularly scheduled communications sessions. Fredrick Herzberk (cited in Kazemek, 1988), a well-known authority on job enrichment, substantiates the significance of communications by listing "direct communications authority" as one of the eight ingredients of a rewarding job.

The disparity between employees' desired source of information and the actual source can be seen in the research of Selma Freidman (cited in Manning and Kent, 1988). This author found that employees place the top executive among the three most desired sources of information. In experimental reality, however, the grapevine was the primary source of information and top management was way down the list.

Emotional and professional support. Providing reasonable emotional and professional support for

employees represents another viable solution to a deficient morale level identified in the literature. Yukl (cited in Niehoff et al., 1989) suggests that supportive leadership is one of the key elements in employee motivation and satisfaction. Eger (1989), in a study of approaches and techniques of 250 successful chief executive officers, discovered that such leaders gave priority consideration to the needs of their people and did not relegate dealing with these needs to some department within the organization. In a Louis Harris poll (cited in Modic, 1989), employees polled indicated that it was very important that managers truly cared about employees as individuals. When this kind of personal concern was expressed, employees felt better about their work climate and exerted more effort toward accomplishing the expressed goals of the organization.

While professional support can be expressed in a number of ways, the frequency of the physical presence of top management positively affects the employee's perceived level of support. Manning and Kent (1988) attribute the consistently high morale level of Wal-Mart employees to the supportive atmosphere created by founder Sam Walton, who personally visits each store annually. Perceiving the value of the physical presence of top management, Peters and Waterman (1982) link it with a management style which they call "management by walking around."

Gilman (1988), who was specifically concerned with

improving morale among teachers, commends support, but support from a source other than management. He developed and experienced success with a collegial support system whereby teachers revitalized each other through a peer coaching arrangement.

Perhaps the factor appearing most often in the literature as indigenous to a desirable morale level was recognition (Brodinsky, 1989; Eger, 1989; Kohn, 1988; Manning & Kent, 1988; Zemke, 1988). Recognition is here viewed in a much broader sense than merely printing names or providing simple tangible rewards. It involves establishing patterns and creating mechanisms that recognize the employees' skills and power to help the organization determine and pursue its course leading to goal achievement. When advancement occurs, appropriate recognition and credit are privately and publicly directed to the deserving employees.

A project undertaken by the marketing department of Blue Cross/Blue Shield (Saffron, 1990) serves to illustrate the potential for combining possible solutions to achieve the goal of elevating staff morale. Determining that staff morale was at a low point because of the apparent success of a competing company while experiencing sagging business in their own, staff were asked to draft a plan for improved marketing that would give the company the edge over this major competitor. The employees responded and settled on specialized television

spots. The company recognized employee contributions by accepting their plan and awarding those with exemplary performance and input with the acting roles in the television spots. Thus decision involvement and appropriate recognition were utilized to bring about significant improvement in staff morale within the organization.

Description and Justification for Solutions Selected

It should be acknowledged that the agency under review had an existent level/step plan as urged by Krueger (1985). In addition, employee decision involvement had been the managerial approach systematically practiced within the system for some time. Based on a careful assessment of the work setting and enlightened through the information gleaned from the literature, this writer proposed to employ four actions aimed at raising the morale among direct-care workers. These selected solution activities address the broad issues of support, recognition, and communications.

Solution 1. During the three months following the commencement of the implementation phase of this practicum, a personal visit by a top level administrator from the agency would be made to each direct-care worker at their service site. An effort would be made to schedule these visits in advance and at a time which minimized possible disruptions and distractions.

The visiting administrator would seek to set a positive tone for the meeting, thus maintaining the intended supportive purpose. Interest would be expressed initially in the personal concerns of the employee, though work-related concerns would not be off limits.

Since many direct-care staff felt their points of service were isolated and sometimes insulated from upper level management, a supportive visit should assuage such feelings. If the visit concluded with the employee feeling valued, affirmed, heard, and thus supported, the purpose would have been achieved. With support being conveyed, the disparity expressed in the Louis Harris poll (cited in Modic, 1989) between employee expectation of management concern being expressed in behalf of staff (75%) and how many feel this attitude of concern actually exists (27%), certainly would be diminished.

Solution 2. Solution two again addressed the support needs of the direct-care staff. This writer intended to implement a monthly round-table conference specifically for direct-care employees. This hour-long meeting would provide a forum in which these staff could dialogue informally with a top administrator. Round-table agendas were to be determined by the staff either through ideas submitted in advance in suggestion boxes or through impromptu contributions offered during the meeting. At the initial gathering, the group would be invited to establish broad guidelines for governing the round-table

sessions.

As stated earlier, the agency placed a real premium on respect for and adherence to administrative levels in any communicative conveyance. Consequently, direct-care staff often felt limited power in getting their concerns heard by those who could bring administrative power to bear on these concerns. Of necessity, care would have to be exercised to prevent the round-table from becoming a threat to regional supervisors or a platform from which staff may ignore or usurp channels. Ideally, the focus would remain on listening, problem solving, and planning from the perspective of togetherness.

Solution 3. The third proposed solution addressed the need of staff for appropriate recognition. This solution was in response to the supposition that significant effort and subsequent achievements often go overlooked, unmentioned, or unrewarded. It involved the establishment and implementation of a procedure for identifying, recording, and rewarding noteworthy performances of direct-care staff. While numerous procedures existed for identifying and addressing staff deficiencies, this procedure would establish a mechanism for hailing those positives within staff behaviors.

The initial challenge was to be the identification of staff endeavors that deserve recognition by other staff and the administration. A sort of deputization of all staff to be on the lookout among their peers for exemplary

efforts would be the basic approach. Staff experiencing low morale often complain that the only time they hear from their supervisors is when they have done something wrong (Manning & Kent, 1988). The corrective plan described herein capitalized on the suggestion of a popular management admonition to "catch people doing something right and praise them for it" (Herman, 1990, p. 120). This writer surmised that the plan would foster the attitude that management values and wishes to recognize exemplary performance and needs the eyes and ears of all staff in order to effectively implement such a wholesome recognition program. In order to further encourage vigilance and reporting of exemplary performance, the reporting individual would share in any experience of public recognition of the employee involved.

So that exemplary activities can be expeditiously recorded in a format that allows for consistent evaluation, reporting sheets would be made available to all employees (see Appendix C). The sheet would serve as the instrument for recording and reporting observed exemplary performances to a panel of judges who would select the most outstanding one for receipt of special recognition.

Once each month, in a general staff meeting, each submission would be briefly reviewed followed by the release of the decision of the judges as to the performance that best reflects the desired spirit of

employees within the agency. The person whose performance generated the submission would then be inducted into the ORES Society--Observed Rendering Exemplary Service--and would join the person making the submission for dinner out with the regional Area Administrator.

Such a recognition procedure keeps the focus on intrinsic rather than extrinsic rewards and does not violate the two principles of acceptable and meaningful incentives identified by Kohn (1988): (1) a focus on the challenge of the task itself rather than on an external motivation, and, (2) the employee feels a sense of self-determination as opposed to feeling controlled by praise or reward.

Huseman and Hatfield (1990), in describing what they call a "reward matrix," maintain that job satisfaction relies on the delicate balance of the giving and getting related to the position. The recognition plan described above would attempt to add credits to the "get-back" dimension of the direct-care worker's role.

This writer was cognizant of a major limitation of such an approach. The novelty of this program would generate interest and inspire participation; these qualities would, however, diminish as familiarity and sameness shadow the practice. Hence, this recognition effort would intentionally be a short-term project. It may be reemployed periodically for brief periods when the original conditions that spawned it reappear. In any

case, the anticipated impact was the demonstration that management was not oblivious to exemplary behavior and was, in fact, eager to acknowledge and reward such. Recognition tied to outstanding performance, along with its accompanying affirmation from peer employees, should eventuate in a substantial boost to morale.

Solution 4. Improved internal communications was the vehicle for this final solution effort directed at raising the morale level among agency direct-care staff. Effective and timely communications have been positively related to employee job satisfaction (Kazemek, 1988; Manning & Kent, 1988).

This writer proposed to improve communications by redirecting a fledgling intra-agency newsletter called "Home Tales," so that it became a monthly communications instrument whose target audience was direct-care staff. Each issue would carry information pertinent to this level of staff including: significant agency occurrences and how these may impact direct-care staff; major accomplishment of individuals, units, or regions; discussions and follow-ups on matters discussed in round-tables; staff development opportunities; and, recognitions of staff exhibiting outstanding performance. If the new "Home Tales" accomplished its intended purpose, direct-care staff should no longer complain that they are the last to know what is going on within the organization.

Report of Action Taken

Once specific solution strategies and a definite implementation time frame were established, the preparatory step was to apprise regional administrators and direct-care supervisors of the plan. In the case of administrators, each strategy was reviewed in a face-to-face meeting; direct-care supervisors received similar information by way of printed communications. Care was exercised at this point so as to preclude any resistance from staff not directly involved in the project. Once appropriate information was disseminated and anxieties allayed, implementation of the four solution strategies was initiated.

Visits to Sites. Unquestionably, visiting each direct-care staff at their service site was the most difficult of the four strategies attempted. The task proved a more formidable one than this writer realized. Coordinating schedules for the accommodation of but a brief visit presented quite a challenge. With considerable effort, direct-care staff at 22 of the 30 service sites received a personal visit by this writer during the implementation period.

Before visits began, staff were informed by an article in the agency newsletter that an impromptu visit could be expected. This was done to reduce possible anxiety on the part of the staff to an unexpected appearance, to explain the purpose of such a visit, and to set the stage for a

positive encounter.

Roundtables. Three one-hour meetings were scheduled in each of the three regions. On-duty direct-care staff were requested to attend but the meetings were open to any staff. This writer arranged and led the roundtables.

At the initial meeting, the purpose of the roundtable was defined as a forum for constructive dialogue between direct-care staff and top administration. It was to be an opportunity for improving understanding of the crucial role of those staff on the cutting edge of the organization. Once a consensus was reached as to purpose, participants were invited to establish ground rules for the three meetings. The result was that staff saw the roundtables as their meetings and looked forward to them each month.

The tone of the roundtables was informal. Priority was given to ideas and concerns introduced by the staff either in the context of the meeting or anonymously by way of a suggestion box. Occasionally, this writer would stimulate discussion with such questions as: "When do you feel best about your job?" "When do you feel worst about your job?" "Could you identify one thing that would improve your ability to do your job well?"

While this writer had some concerns that the staff would capitalize on the roundtable format for criticizing regional administration, such did not materialize. The meetings, instead, became an evaluative and planning forum

where teamship was strengthened.

ORES Society. ORES Society recommendation forms, in convenient self-addressed mailers, were distributed to all direct-care staff at the first roundtable meeting. Supervisors received forms and explanatory information through intra-agency mailings along with encouragement to recommend their supervisees when appropriate. Staff were requested to assist administration in recognizing deserving individuals for exceptional service. The word "deputized" was used to underscore the expectation placed upon all staff for being the eyes and ears for reporting exemplary service observed in their fellow workers.

Once a recommendation form was received on a direct-care staff, several actions would be set in motion. A letter was dispatched from the writer's office notifying the employee that they had been recommended for inclusion into the ORES Society. The letter identified what observed activity prompted the recommendation, what fellow staff submitted the form, and the process for determining membership in the Society. Each month two judges would select from among those recommended one direct-care staff from each area for inclusion into the Society. During roundtables or other total staff meetings, all individuals recommended would be verbally recognized. Those selected by the judges for Society membership would be so informed and presented a printed certificate acknowledging membership. Later, they would join the person

recommending them for dinner with the Area Administrator.

"Home Tales." Effective communication was crucial to the success of the first three solution strategies. "Home Tales" became the vehicle for communicative augmentation of these solutions. Arrangements were made with the regular editor of the publication allowing this writer to assume full responsibility for publishing the newsletter for the implementation period. A schedule was developed and regional reporters identified. While the paper maintained an agency perspective, the target group for three months was direct-care staff. What had been a quarterly publication became a monthly one.

"Home Tales" carried personal information about employees, editorials addressing matters of special interest to direct-care staff, listings of ORES inductees, and reviews of monthly roundtable meetings.

CHAPTER V

RESULTS, DISCUSSION, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The problem addressed in this practicum related to a diminished morale level among direct-care staff. This morale level was impacting staff turnover as well as the qualitative and quantitative levels of services being offered through the agency. The staff were not performing at their maximum peaks of efficiency.

Four solution strategies chosen by this writer to improve the morale level of direct-care staff were oriented toward support, communications, and recognition. Increased support of front-line staff was demonstrated through a personal visit from a top administrator and through three dialoguing sessions with these staff and the same administrator in hour-long meetings called roundtables.

Communications deficiencies were addressed through reorienting an intra-agency newsletter so that its target audience was the direct-care staff. The publication objective became the education, recognition, and affirmation of these organizational members.

To encourage wholesome and widespread recognition of these particular staff, a formal methodology was established whereby staff could recommend their peers for special recognition prompted by exemplary service.

Results

Objective 1. The number of direct-care staff turning over during the quarter would be at least two less than the average quarterly turnover during the previous year.

Computer data retrieved from personnel files indicated the average quarterly direct-care termination for the previous year to be 10. A similar search for the quarter of implementation revealed no terminations from among this same group. To assure that seasonal deviations played no significant role in this reduction, terminations recorded during quarters congruous with the implementation quarter of the two prior years were reviewed. These quarters recorded 11 and 5 exits respectively.

Objective 2. All three regional areas would report improvement in direct-care morale levels as perceived by supervisors during pre and post interviews.

When supervisors of direct-care staff in each region were asked to rate the composite morale levels of their staff on a continuum of 0 to 10, the combined responses offered by supervisors indicated a post implementation rating two full points higher than that reported during pre implementation interviews (see Appendix A for sample of Supervisors' Questionnaire).

Objective 3. Self-reported job satisfaction average ratings would improve during the implementation phase by at least 1 point over the average rating at the

pretest stage.

Table 1 reports the mean overall job satisfaction rating given by direct-care staff of each region before implementation and after implementation surveys.

Table 1

Mean Overall Job Satisfaction Rating Reported by
Direct-care Staff

Region	Before	After
1	3.4	3.92
2	3.3	3.42
3	3.1	3.67

Discussion

Three measurable objectives were established for determining whether the solution strategies were effective in improving morale. Of these three, two were clearly met while one fell short of the threshold at which achievement would have occurred.

Objective 1 would have been achieved with as many as 8 terminations occurring during the period; results indicated no terminations. Why such a deviation from the norm? While the solution strategies employed certainly made a difference, at least one other variable must be considered in the accounting. Almost half of the

employees surveyed were still in their first year of employment with the agency. In the months preceding implementation, two of the regions had experienced major turnovers of direct-care staff. The supposition is that the point in the ebb and flow turnover cycle did not altogether precipitate but did affect the lack of exits during the implementation quarter.

Solution strategies seemed to create optimism and increase interests among staff who liked the idea of being heard and of being included in some planning that involved someone from the head office. The contentions of the literature were validated: People tend to stay where they feel valued and experience a sense of belonging.

While supervisors from each region reported that improvement had occurred in the morale levels of individuals they supervised, there were indications that the supervisors themselves felt left out of what was happening. Some suggested that morale of supervisory staff might deserve some consideration. One region, on the impetus of supervisors' suggestions, began scheduling roundtable sessions specifically for staff not included in the direct-care groups.

The third objective of this practicum failed to achieve its intended outcome. Though staff from each region reported improvement in job satisfaction (see table 1), no region reported the full point required for achievement of the objective. Table 2 reveals little

Table 2

Staff's Satisfaction Ratings on 13 Job Aspects

Work Aspect	Region					
	1		2		3	
	Pre	Post	Pre	Post	Pre	Post
General working environment	4.39	4.18	4.08	3.83	4.00	4.09
Supervision	4.50	4.91	4.77	5.00	3.14	4.25
Work schedule	4.24	4.09	3.31	3.58	4.14	3.33
Pay	2.78	3.55	2.69	3.00	2.57	3.17
Benefits	4.22	4.45	3.92	4.50	4.43	4.25
Advancements opportunities	3.82	3.45	2.92	2.83	3.14	2.64
Training opportunities provided by agency	4.06	4.64	4.54	4.50	3.86	3.33
Training opportunities delivered by experts outside the agency	3.27	3.73	4.62	4.09	3.67	3.17
What is expected of me	4.47	4.36	4.38	3.83	4.00	3.33
Relating to co-workers	4.47	4.64	4.42	4.25	4.86	4.00
Relating to clients and parents	4.53	4.64	4.38	4.25	4.43	4.08
Job security	4.47	4.55	4.00	4.33	4.43	3.67
Recognition of quality performance	3.76	4.09	3.54	3.50	3.29	4.00
MEAN RATINGS	4.08	4.25	3.97	3.93	3.84	3.64

variance in pre and post satisfaction levels when staff responded to the thirteen specific criterion requested by the survey. When the broader responses were recorded--responses utilized in judging whether the objective was achieved--improvement in job satisfaction was indicated.

Self-reported job satisfaction levels were almost certainly impacted by an unexpected cessation of state referrals to the agency because of the new per-diem expectations announced as a part of a coalition stand with several other service providers. Subsequent reduction of referrals by approximately 50% decreased population somewhat but, more importantly, forced the areas to accept more difficult clients in order to maintain expected levels of population. The related tensions undoubtedly eroded job satisfaction measurably.

A cafeteria of anecdotal information was provided in the open-ended section of the Job Satisfaction Survey (see Appendix B). Some staff chose to seize the opportunity to anonymously complain about issues holding special interests to them. Others made helpful suggestions that will be included in a formal evaluation process. In one instance, information was provided that brought to light a region's misinterpretation and subsequent violation of an agency policy regarding holiday schedules. This portion of the survey, included almost as a second thought, turned out to be a very valuable component.

An unanticipated outcome was that the roundtable meetings took on a tone opposite that expected. This writer was poised to hear a considerable amount of complaining and placing blame on area supervision. Such did not occur. In fact, the overall tone of the meetings was upbeat, positive, and constructive. When problems were identified, a spirit of general ownership prevailed. Direct-care staff in each region identified a need that was pertinent for their particular work environment, then volunteer committees agreed to draft suggestions for alleviating the need. Their work was ongoing at this reporting.

In summary, this practicum demonstrates that increasing support, communications, and appropriate recognition for direct-care staff does carry the potential for improving their morale level causing them to stay longer and work happier. The four solution strategies precipitated success in the achievement of two out of three identified objectives with some rationalization that success for the third was negated by an unexpected stressful occurrence.

Recommendations

Issuing from the information and experiences gleaned from this practicum, the following recommendations are offered:

1. Top administration must adopt a pro-active posture in promoting and supporting efforts directed at morale assessment and improvement.
2. Resist the temptation to reinvent the wheel; when morale lags, consult the literature and incorporate experience into corrective strategies.
3. Take the necessary time to apprise administrative and supervisory people of the purpose, strategies, and schedule of the project.
4. If possible, involve all levels of staff in the solution strategies. This eases tensions, anxieties, and resistances flowing from turf-guarding, hierarchical jealousies, and suspicions.
5. Make sure that the program is initiated and implemented with a leadership tone that is upbeat, open, positive, and team building.
6. Do not allow staff to use a roundtable forum to badger individuals--supervisor or otherwise--or undermine supervisory channels.

7. Create opportunities where staff are encouraged to not only identify work related problems, but to also commit their resources to problem resolutions.

8. Adopt a philosophy of listening without the need to defend.

9. Do not fail to follow through with verbal contracts and promises made.

Continuance

This practicum has sensitized the administrative teams to the staff morale issue. There will be periodic assessments of morale levels and intentional planning to assure this vital area is not ignored within the culture of the organization.

The staff have requested the continuation of two solution strategies with minor modifications. The ORES Society plan for recognition will be continued with quarterly inductions occurring in each region. Two, one-hour roundtables, led by a top administrator, are to be scheduled in each region every six months. In addition, administrative staff in one area are replicating the roundtable concept in order to provide their staff an additional forum for communicating with them. As indicated earlier, substantive concerns appearing in the open-ended division of the Job Satisfaction Survey will be evaluated and, when appropriate, educational or

correctional actions initiated.

Dissemination

Copies of this report will be provided members of the administrative team within the organization where this writer is employed. Discussion of the findings will be included as an agenda item in an upcoming administrative team meeting.

This writer has been active in the state association of residential child care workers. Through the newsletter of this association, agencies will be informed of the practicum experience. It is anticipated that networking and perhaps some consulting or focused dialoguing will result.

During the final weeks of practicum implementation, this writer was invited to lead a workshop entitled "Practices That Build Staff Morale" as a part of the annual conference of the Southeastern Group Child Care Association. Twenty-eight administrators and program directors participated. Feedback was limited but positive in nature.

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APPENDIX A

SUPERVISORS' QUESTIONNAIRE
ON PERCEIVED MORALE LEVELS

SUPERVISORS' QUESTIONNAIRE

Our agency is reviewing the issue of staff morale among our direct-care (Group Leader) employees. You can assist by responding to the following items:

ITEM ONE

For the direct-care staff that you supervise, please rate their present composite staff morale on the following continuum. (Circle one)

(Lowest) 0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 (Highest)

ITEM TWO

In your opinion, is the rating you gave... (check only one)

- ☐ significantly above
- ☐ slightly above
- ☐ about average
- ☐ slightly below
- ☐ significantly below

that typically characterizing those in group leader positions?

ITEM THREE

How many direct-care (Group Leader) staff do you normally supervise? _____

This survey was designed by J. McAdams as a part of a 1991 practicum on staff morale.

APPENDIX B
SELF-REPORTED EMPLOYEE
JOB SATISFACTION SURVEY

JOB SATISFACTION SURVEY

I. How long have you been in your present job? _____

11. On a scale of 1 to 6, rate the following aspects of your job. For each aspect, circle the number that best represents your satisfaction level as of the present time. Please rate each aspect.

	(Low)					(highest)
General working environment	1	2	3	4	5	6
Supervision	1	2	3	4	5	6
Work schedule	1	2	3	4	5	6
Pay	1	2	3	4	5	6
Benefits	1	2	3	4	5	6
Advancements opportunities	1	2	3	4	5	6
Training opportunities provided by agency	1	2	3	4	5	6
Training opportunities delivered by experts from outside the agency	1	2	3	4	5	6
What is expected of me	1	2	3	4	5	6
Relating to co-workers	1	2	3	4	5	6
Relating to clients and parents	1	2	3	4	5	6
Job security	1	2	3	4	5	6
Recognition of quality performance	1	2	3	4	5	6

111. Rate your overall level of present satisfaction with your job. (Circle one)

low below average average positive strongly positive

IV. Please add any comments you may wish to offer.

Survey designed by J. McAdams as a part of practicum I.

APPENDIX C
ORES SOCIETY REPORT FORM

ORES REPORT FORM

NOTICE! To the Holder of this Document...

You are hereby deputized and requested to be on the lookout for any group leader rendering exemplary service. We wish to give them what they deserve. A reward shall be offered should your submitted observation best reflect the spirit of a GBCH&FM group leader as determined by a trio of judges. Reports must be placed in a sealed envelope and filed with the Area office by the last day of each month.

OBSERVER'S TESTIMONY

Yes, I _____ observed a
(Name)
group leader rendering exemplary service. His/her name
is _____. I observed
him/her on _____. I thought to myself: Now that
(Date)
is service above and beyond the call of duty! That is a
selfless expression of devotion to those we serve! That is
an attitude that is inspiring! That is a classic example
of exemplary service! Here is what he/she was doing...

For this action, I recommend that this group leader be recognized and duly inducted into the ORES (Observed Rendering Exemplary Service) Society.

Signed _____
(Observer's Name) (Date)

Form designed by J. McAdams as part of practicum I.